

## **Overturning Don't Ask, Don't Tell (TPM)**

**May 8, 2009 By U.S. Rep. Rush Holt**

This week, our nation's armed forces suffered another casualty--the loss of 1st Lt. Dan Choi, an Iraq war veteran and a member of the New York National Guard. On March 19, on the Rachel Maddow Show, Choi announced he was gay. That triggered the Army to begin the process of separating Choi from the military under the current "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

Choi is an Arabic linguist--exactly the kind of critically-skilled soldier and leader his infantry platoon needs if they deploy to a country in which Arabic is the common language. Bluntly stated, his dismissal from the military--and the dismissal of other gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) servicemembers--will put lives at risk.

Our national security is heavily dependent on translators, specialists, and interpreters within the intelligence community, the diplomatic corps, and the military. Prior to September 11, 2001 our intelligence community was at only 30 percent readiness in languages critical to national security. The government revealed after the 9/11 attacks that it had a 123,000-hour backlog of Arabic language recordings waiting to be analyzed. The last thing we should be doing is telling Arabic linguists in the military that they are not needed.

I have worked successfully in Congress to pass legislation to require the federal government to invest in the creation of a workforce possessing requisite language skills needed to combat terrorists. We need to produce more, not less, specialists like Dan Choi.

I know the President does not support the current discriminatory policy. He stated so plainly in a handwritten note to another Army officer dismissed under the current policy that he inherited --2nd Lt. Sandy Tsao. This is a situation where the President needs the help of Congress in correcting this policy. I am an original cosponsor of a bill (H.R. 1283) that would overturn Don't Ask, Don't Tell. We have 140 cosponsors on this bill at the moment, more than enough to justify moving it expeditiously through the House Committee on Armed Services and to the House floor before the July Fourth holiday.

In the meantime, the President could issue an executive order announcing a study of the current policy. During that time, there could be a moratorium on any investigations or

prosecutions of LGBT soldiers.

Overturning Don't Ask, Don't Tell is not simply about providing truly equal rights to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. It's about preventing the hemorrhage of critical military talent from an already-overstretched American military engaged in two simultaneous wars. It is about ensuring we don't lose men like Dan Choi who would help our military address a critical need.

Ending this misguided policy will strengthen, not weaken, our armed forces.

My colleague - the great Civil Rights hero John Lewis - often quotes Martin Luther King in saying that it is always the right time to do the right thing. To ensure that men like Dan Choi can help keep our country safe, now is the time to end Don't Ask, Don't Tell.